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Interview with Carol Hamilton

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by Fred Alsberg

FRED ALSBERG:

When did you first begin to write poetry? What was the occasion?

CAROL HAMILTON:

I had never had interest in poetry, but was writing and publishing short stories and articles when my children were small and we lived in Hiram, Ohio, a small college town near Kent State. A time of personal tragedy came in my life, for which I was totally unprepared. That and all the turmoil on our campus and the tragedy at nearby Kent changed everything in my life. A friend on the faculty there, who has for many years since been a poetry editor, showed me some poetry she had written at the Iowa University workshop with Paul Engle when she was suffering from psychological problems and had a couple of attempted suicides and hospitalizations behind her. She told me that, though she did not consider what she had written there as very good poetry, the writing had been helpful in getting her through that hard time. She suggested writing poetry as a resource for surviving tragic events.

So I began writing poetry, drawing on the only poetry I had ever really liked, that of John Donne, and the lyrics of the songwriters of that era, Judy Collins, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and especially, Simon and Garfunkel (of special interest to me was their "The Dangling Conversation"). I found in these writers what I liked in general, the use of metaphor to make sense of things. So that is how I began to write my own poetry. I began publishing immediately, but I had no idea if what I was writing were really poetry or not. But it was the coffeehouse poetry reading era, and there were lots of opportunities to share. My mother came from Oklahoma one summer to stay with my three children so that I could get away from problems at home for a little while, and I went to the Indiana University Writers' Conference. Twenty-five were accepted in each workshop on the basis of work submitted, and I went in short story and won first prize for the week in that category. But I sat at the shadowy edges of the poets' workshop with Lionel Wiggams, listened, and also attended and shared at their critiquing/sharing sessions to ask if I were really writing poetry. They were most enthusiastic and encouraging, so I continued. I learned there that the various schools of poets do not always blend comfortably, and I wrote a little verse called "Wiggams' Ark" which went:

> Two by two the poets came
> of every style and creed,
> and true to form, the species did
> refuse to interbreed.

Jesse Hill Ford was at that time a regular short story writer for THE ATLANTIC. He was my teacher, and he gave me the award in short story. He told me that I should write three hours a day. When I went home, I began writing from 4-7 a.m., before my children arose. But my little boys discovered that I was up and decided that was a good time to awaken for play, so I changed my writing time to 9 until midnight. I found the style and content of my writing varied greatly at those different parts of the day. I soon returned to teaching to support my family, and I have always, ever since, done my writing early in the morning before anything else. I found that after teaching all day and caring for my own children, there was no creative energy left over for the evening or night. I just now thought that it might be fun to start writing poetry at night once more.

FRED ALSBERG:

How do your poems take shape? Origins and forms?

CAROL HAMILTON:

How poems take shape is a mystery to me. I believe that when a writer sits down to write at a

regular time and place, the mind learns it is expected to snap to attention, and somehow, it always does. But that is a product of long practice. I usually write at least one poem a day. People used to asked me if the writer does not need to wait for inspiration. I find inspiration comes at odd times, usually when I am driving or reading or some other time when there is no opportunity to sit down and write. But I do jot down ideas on scraps of paper. I do not keep these in any kind of order, but keep them in a box or bag or jumbled within a stack of papers.

If I need an idea for a poem, I'll grab a few, which usually bring my ideas back to me completely out of the original context, but that only adds new dimensions to the original idea. Sometimes, I may sit in the yard or look out the window or read a few poems by some other poet or read in a book I have on the history of food, or the BOOK OF SAINTS, or look through a book of paintings. Always something starts stirring, and often several different ideas converge with a complex of memories coming to the fore as well. I start writing and keep writing until suddenly some surprise comes to me. I am always astounded that it all came together somehow. I always feel as if I just discovered something I did not know I knew. Then I type the work on the computer, play around with the shape, the line breaks, the sounds, look up some of the words, which also sometimes adds some new ideas, as words, definitions are so complex and full of history. Then I print off a copy on used paper, record it and listen to it, change it until it sounds right. The next day I listen again, change some more, and usually, I am finished with it and ready for another. Some I completely finish in a very short time, others I may play with for a few days. I am not a poet who keeps agonizing over endless changes to one poem. Sometimes I'll take up an old one and find I want to re-write it, but that is usually when I need to retype it for some reason. I do have one critique group and I share a few poems with them each month and find lots of work to do after those sessions. But this is the first group I've ever stayed with, and I have only been in it about a year. I find it very helpful, as this is a group with good chemistry. But basically, I work alone.

But normally, I don't keep changing things unless an editor asks me to, which happens. When that happens, I usually go along with the request, unless I just don't like the change, in which case, I just send it to someone else. Sometimes I change a poem back to the original version for re-prints or anthologizing, etc. But usually, I find editors make very good suggestions, and most of what I have ever learned about poetry I learned from some very kind editors, especially Judith Neeld, who used to be editor of STONE COUNTRY in Massachusetts. I have never met her, but I should build a shrine to her. She taught me a lot with great generosity of time and talent. Many of the poems she critiqued for me over and over were finally published by some other magazine. She always explained why. And sometimes she published my work, too. I feel very sure that I learned more from her than anyone.

I love to write in form and often just decide I want to write a villanelle or a sonnet today. Villanelle is my favorite form, but I really like terza rima, too. I used to be very strict about the rules, as if I were doing my figure 8's for the Olympic's competitions. Now, after doing lots and lots of that, I find I enjoy playing with the forms. That is what most good poets do. But I think the poet needs to earn the right. I used to tell my students of 0 level grammar classes at Rose State, "It is like checkers. You can only go one direction until you become a king. Then you can go anywhere." Most of us want to go anywhere before we have earned the right.

FRED ALSBERG:

How has living in Oklahoma affected your work?

CAROL HAMILTON:

Living in Oklahoma has been a great influence on my work, but it was not originally. I spent a number of years living in Connecticut, Scotland, New York, West Virginia, Ohio and Indiana. When I returned to Oklahoma in 1971, I had only been writing poetry during the last couple of years in Ohio and one year of living in Indianapolis. I grew up here, but on returning, all the remembered but unnoticed history and landscape was a freshly experienced delight and shock. Much of my writing for many years was full of images from our landscape, and the whole feel of the plains, the expanse, the swept-clean surface, the blown-away history, the Plains Tribes' belief that a man is a tall as the distance he can see.... this has all been very much a part of my writing since I returned to Oklahoma. I hated Oklahoma history in junior high school, but since I had to pass a test in the subject to teach here when I returned, I read Arell Gibson's book on Oklahoma history (he had been a professor of mine at Phillips University many years before he made his name at the University of Oklahoma) and found how rich and fascinating our history is. I have especially written a lot about western Oklahoma, as I grew up in Enid, and my relatives raised cattle and wheat around Capron, where I loved to go as a child. I have written children's books about the desert, and that began before I had ever been to the desert, so a long love affair with landscapes of scarcity began for me on my return to Oklahoma.

FRED ALSBERG:

Which writers have influenced you? Which writers would you suggest we read?

CAROL HAMILTON:

This I have already partly answered, but early on, my biggest problem was to find poets whose work I liked. And I advise every beginning poet to read lots and lots of poets to try to find whom they really like. And also to continue reading those they really don't like. In other words, the first job of anyone who is serious about writing poetry is to read lots of poets, and read them seriously to begin to discover what you like and what you do not.

I suppose I liked T. S. Eliot before I ever read him. I have several letters from editors in my early days of writing, before I had read Eliot, comparing my work to his, either in praise or blame. And when I read him, I liked him a lot. I think the reason I wrote the way I did was that the times in which I began writing and thinking about life was a time vastly influenced by Eliot. We were at Yale for several years and the talk (and that is what we did there .....talk!) was imbued with the every thought of Eliot, though I did not realize that that is where some of my thinking came from. I saw "Murder in the Cathedral" performed in a cathedral there and heard a lot of talk about "The Hollow Men," but that was all I officially knew of Eliot. But once I read him, I loved his work. Long after I was accused of copying him.

It took me many years to find two poems I really loved, and I still love them: "The Dark and the Fair" by Stanley Kunitz, and "After Apple Picking" by Robert Frost. Over the years, I've found many poets I adore. But some of them I did not come to like easily. Some of my favorites are: Elizabeth Bishop, Wislawa Szymborska, Kunitz, Mary Oliver, Yeats, some of Auden, Robert Hass, Czeslaw Milosz, Yehudi Amichi, Billy Collins, Naomi Shihab Nye, Li Young Lee, Ted Kooser, Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Unamuno and Borges, and probably my very favorite, Seamus Heaney. I really admire Richard Wilbur and W. S. Merwin, but I don't read them for fun. There are so many wonderful poets writing now. There is really no end to the list. I suggest beginning poets read everybody and find out whom they like best. One of my favorite books, which I turn to whenever I feel like writing a short but astounding piece (!), is the wonderful anthology by Czeslaw Milosz, A BOOK OF LUMINOUS THINGS.

FRED ALSBERG:

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers concerning word choice? Concerning the sounds of words and their arrangement?

CAROL HAMILTON:

The very best advice I have ever heard on improving word choice and sound in poetry came from Ezra Pound (whom I also like) via W. S. Merwin. I attended a workshop with Merwin in Tulsa a few years ago, and he told us of going, at the age of 18, to a hospital in New Jersey to meet Ezra Pound and ask him how to become a great poet. Pound told him no one could help anyone else become a poet. The only advice he had to help the poet was to memorize a lot of poetry and translate a lot of poetry. Merwin did a lot of both, and he came to believe that poetry is all in the ear. The poet must educate and feed the ear.

I have been memorizing poetry for about two years now and find that it has done more for me both in my understanding of the ideas in the poems and of life in general, and of how sound and word choice work in the poems I have learned. I do not think there is anything, other than reading and loving a lot of poetry, that can do more to help the poet improve his/her work. When great sound lives in your head, you begin to absorb it into your own work. I have written and published some poetry in Spanish and have published some translations, and translating, too, is extremely helpful in understanding the importance of all the connotations of word choice. I have not done much of that lately, as I'm no longer teaching Spanish or Spanish literature and have not been reading much in Spanish, so I have not felt inspired to do so. But anyone can work with translation. Even if you do not know another language, you can find several translations of a poem and compare them, selecting lines and words from each to make the best version you can. My students at the University of Central Oklahoma, in our Spanish Literature in Translation from the 20th Century class, quickly began to know a good translation from a bad translation, even when they did not know Spanish. They had studied the life and the intent of the poet, and they realized when something did not ring true. Anything that does not ring true is bad for poetry. But there is never a perfect translation. Borges has pointed out that every translation has something to teach us. No poem is ever perfect either. Perhaps that is why we keep trying so hard.

FRED ALSBERG:

How do you decide where to break your lines?

CAROL HAMILTON:

Line breaks are so very important, and when I was teaching poetry, I usually gave my students a list of about 20 things different poets have said about how lines breaks should be done and of the rules some follow. I'm a full-time, right-brained person. I have no rule. But I always think about each line...over and over...for that is a very important part of poetry. Silence and space are as important as sound and print for poetry. I cannot give a definitive answer, as it is very dependent on the poem, the sound, the look I want on the page, possible confusions for the reader, etc. This would be a good topic for a very long book.

FRED ALSBERG:

You taught for many years. How did teaching affect you as a writer?

CAROL HAMILTON:

What I have to say in response to that question is a cliché. I learned more about poetry in the seven or so years that I taught poetry at the University of Central Oklahoma than I had learned in the many years I had been writing before that. But that is always true of teaching anything, and I think I've taught everything. I taught in the elementary schools most of my life, and I began learning a lot when teaching poetry writing to children. Children make wonderful poets with only a little guidance. I was teaching in a ghetto school in Indianapolis, second grade, before the integration of stu-

dents, but just as faculties had been integrated, to 34 extremely deprived, in every way, students. I was trying to teach them about metaphor, though I didn't call it that. I popped corn and had them tell me everything that sound was like to them. They could not write much down, so I put their ideas on the board and we made a group poem. They gave me the best line I've ever received from students, and I've done this exercise often: "It sounds like an army of ants marching over the roof." I learned everyone owns poetry. Everyone can speak poetry. On teaching Oklahoma history to second graders, I discovered the speeches of some of the chiefs of the Plains Tribes at the Council at Medicine Lodge and other historic gatherings. They had no written language, but they spoke poetry. I do not teach anymore, but I still spend a lot of time working in schools, and I always learn wonderful things from students. But mainly you learn as a teacher because of all the preparation you have to do to be ready to teach. Nobody gets better at anything without work.

FRED ALSBERG:

In what way do your spiritual beliefs find their way into your poems?

CAROL HAMILTON:

For me, poetry is too inextricably intertwined with spirituality to talk of them as separate states. For me both have to do with ultimate truth, which is something of which I am sure I have no particular wisdom. So I just try to be as honest as I can be in both realms. My poetry is probably more about what I do not know than about what I do know. It is about exploring what I kind of, sort of, maybe, ask-me-next-Friday, think. Neither poetry nor spirituality nor science is worth anything if it lies.

FRED ALSBERG:

What are you happiest about in your poetry? Least contented?

CAROL HAMILTON:

I'm happiest when I am writing poetry and I am always delighted when I finish a piece. And sometimes I am joyous when I see it in print. That is not because it is in print. I rarely remember what I have written. Once done, forgotten. There are a few poems I remember writing, and I love them, but usually, I completely forget. And when a poem comes out in a magazine, and I read it and have no recollection of having ever written it, but it makes me laugh or cry, then I'm really delighted. I am least contented when I read something I have written that I think is silly or something even I can't understand, or it is sappy. I often see those things in print. But I decided long ago that if I wrote something that I liked at one time and someone else liked it enough to print it, it has served its purpose, even if it is a sappy purpose. I've never thought I had to be perfect. Good thing, too!

FRED ALSBERG:

How do you see the state of poetry in the United States today.

CAROL HAMILTON:

I think the state of poetry in America today is marvelous, fantastic, the best! There are so many good poets working and there are so many young people writing wonderful things. Poetry will never be popular in America in the way it was in Eastern Europe and Russia under Communism when it served as a voice for some kind of freedom under oppression, or as it is for the culture of my student from Lebanon who told of his youth in a land in which Ancient Persian poetry is memorized and quoted with great reverence in the home, daily. Poetry takes time and a quiet space and patience, and so far, America has been a land of hurry and noise. But that is all right. From our slam poetry and hip hop and all the pop culture banging away at our ears, we are evolving a voice that is ours, and lots of people are listening. Under the noise, we all hope for a bit of truth, I think. For me, poetry is the quiet voice of truth. We don't need to shout.